

PREGNANCY AND HOMICIDE:

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washingtonpost.com **The Toll:** Researchers are just beginning to discover what has been a hidden risk of pregnancy: Pregnant women and new mothers are more likely to be victims of homicide than to die of any single natural cause, several statewide studies have shown.

The Victims: As public health experts focus new attention on homicide during pregnancy, the Washington region has become a focal point. Research rarely casts light on the lives of those who were slain or how violence entered their lives at such a pivotal time.

The Legacy: The tragedy of maternal homicide lingers in the lives of children left behind, some of them born as their mothers were dying. Older siblings sometimes witnessed the violence. The children often must be raised by their grandparents.

Part 1

Many New or Expectant Mothers Die Violent Deaths

By Donna St. George, Washington Post Staff Writer

Their killings produced only a few headlines, but across the country in the last decade, hundreds of pregnant women and new mothers have been slain. Even as Scott Peterson (news - web sites)'s trial became a public fascination, little was said about how often it happens, why, and whether it is a fluke or a social syndrome.



AP Photo



Their deaths passed quietly. Tara Chambers, 29, was gunned down on a June morning inside her North Carolina home. Rebecca Johnson, 16, was shot in the chest as she sat in a pickup truck in Oklahoma. Ana Diaz, 28, was killed in a parking lot in Reston as she stopped to get a friend on their way to work.

They all were pregnant, with futures that seemed sure to unfold over many years. One was a nurse's assistant who planned to name her daughter T'Kaiya. Another had just bought a house.

The youngest was a high school cheerleader.

Their killings produced a few local headlines, then faded, each a seeming aberration in the community where it happened.

But pregnant women like them have been slain in Maryland and Mississippi, in California and Kansas, in Ohio and Illinois. Jenny McMechen, 24, was shot in a friend's home in Plainfield, Conn., and Kerry Repp, 29, was shot in her Oregon bedroom, and Tasha Winters, 16, was shot in Indiana the day she told her boyfriend about the baby. Ardena Carter, 24, was found dead in the Georgia woods, and Kathleen Terry, 22, was run over in Idaho, and Melesha Francis, 26, was strangled in New York, and Thelma Jones, 21, was shot sitting on her back steps in Louisiana -- the day her mother ordered a cake for her baby shower.

A year-long examination by The Washington Post of death-record data in states across the country documents the killings of 1,367 pregnant women and new mothers since 1990. This is only part of the national toll, because no reliable system is in place to track such cases.

Largely invisible, it is a phenomenon that is as consequential as it is poorly understood. Even in the past two years -- as the Laci Peterson ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) homicide case has become a public fascination, with a jury last week recommending that her husband, Scott, be sentenced to death in her killing -- little has been said about the larger convergence of pregnancy and homicide: how often it happens, why, and whether it is a fluke or a social syndrome.

In the Washington region alone, at least three pregnant women have been killed in the past seven weeks -- one in St. Mary's County, a second in Manassas, a third in Fairfax County. Another pregnant woman was found slain Thursday in Missouri.

Until recently, many of the cases have gone virtually unstudied, uncounted, untracked. Police agencies across the country do not regularly ask about maternal status when they investigate homicides. And health experts have focused historically on the medical complications of pregnancy -- embolism, hemorrhage, infection -- not on fatal violence.

"It's very hard to connect the dots when you don't even see the dots," said Elaine Alpert, a public health expert at Boston University. "It's only just starting to be recognized that there is a trend or any commonalities between these deaths."

The Post's analysis shows that the killings span racial and ethnic groups. In cases whose details were known, 67 percent of women were killed with firearms. Many women were slain at home -- in bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens -- usually by men they knew. Husbands. Boyfriends. Lovers.

The cases are not commonplace compared with other homicides but are more frequent than most people know -- and have changed the way some experts think about pregnancy.

Five years ago in Maryland, state health researchers Isabelle Horon and Diana Cheng set out to study maternal deaths, using sophisticated methods to spot dozens of overlooked cases in their state.

They assumed they would find more deaths from medical complications than the state's statistics showed. The last thing they expected was murder.

But in their study, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (news - web sites) in 2001, they wrote that in Maryland, "a pregnant or recently pregnant woman is more likely to be a victim of homicide than to die of any other cause."

"It was a huge surprise," said Horon, who recalls paperwork covering the researchers' kitchen tables on weekends and evenings as they sought to understand the astonishing numbers. "We thought we had to have made a mistake. We kept checking and checking and rechecking."

Their findings, as it turned out, were no error. Homicide accounted for 50 of 247 maternal deaths in Maryland over a six-year period -- more than 20 percent. It had caused more deaths than cardiovascular disorders, embolisms or accidents.

"People have this misconception that pregnancy is a safe haven," Cheng said.

Building upon the Maryland study and others, The Post contacted 50 states and the District for all possible data about maternal deaths during pregnancy or postpartum months. Few states track homicides in a comprehensive way, but many states could provide some data, mostly from death certificates. The Post combined what it collected with cases culled from other sources.

The resulting 1,367 maternal homicides took place over 14 years.

"That's a formidable number -- and that's just the tip," said Judith McFarlane, who studies violence and pregnancy at Texas Woman's University and who described the void of reliable numbers as "embarrassing." She observed: "You can't address a problem that we don't document. You can't reduce them. You can't prevent them. In essence, they don't exist."

In all, 13 states said they had no way of telling how many pregnant and postpartum women had been killed in recent years.

The states included California, where the Peterson case has flashed across television screens and filled newspaper columns since Christmas Eve 2002, when Laci Peterson, eight months pregnant, was reported missing. Her body was discovered in San Francisco Bay in April 2003.

That year, California for the first time changed its death certificate process to include a female victim's maternity status, but no data are available yet.

In the nation's most populous state, no one can say how many pregnant women like Peterson have been killed.

Three weeks after Peterson disappeared in Modesto, Quinnisha Thomas lost her life in Sacramento, 80 miles away. Eight months pregnant, Thomas, 18, was walking home from a grocery store when her ex-boyfriend shot her in the head execution-style because, prosecutors said, he believed fatherhood would get in the way of his music career. "This was a big, major inconvenience for him," prosecutor Mark Curry said.

Other states that say they have no way of counting pregnant and postpartum homicides include Arizona, where Melinda Gonzalez, 20, was found dead in a park when she was three months pregnant; and Pennsylvania, where Christina Colon, 24, five months pregnant, was shot and found dead in a quarry.

Cara Krulewitch, a University of Maryland researcher who has studied maternal deaths in the District and Maryland, contended that states are not to blame so much as the lack of a national focus.

The FBI ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) collects comprehensive homicide statistics but does not look at pregnancy. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([news](#) - [web sites](#)) tracks maternal health but has no uniform way of monitoring maternal killings.

"The system is flawed," Krulewitch said.

In Maryland, which keeps track of cases better than most states, slightly more than 10 percent of all homicides among women ages 14 to 44 happened to a pregnant or postpartum woman in the past decade. If that held true nationally, it would suggest about 295 maternal homicides nationwide a year .

Jacquelyn Campbell of Johns Hopkins University said the number of cases has surprised her, even after her many years of research on women's homicides. Although she knew of pregnant homicide victims, she said, "I thought it was a tragedy. I didn't think it was a trend."

Now, she has come to believe: "It's a phenomenon. It probably was always there, but we just didn't know."

The homicides documented by The Post happened in small mountain towns, in tough urban neighborhoods, in quiet suburban subdivisions. The women who died included a college student, a popular waitress, an actress, a church volunteer, a mother of three, a Navy petty officer, an immigrant housekeeper, a businesswoman, a high school athlete, an Army captain, a minister's wife, a Head Start teacher.

More than 100 were teenagers, barely beyond their own girlhoods. Many already had children -- now left behind.

In Tennessee, Kay Briggs found a letter in her mailbox several days after her pregnant daughter was slain in Chesapeake, Va. In it was her daughter's photograph: a beaming Melissa O'Connell, showing off her protruding abdomen. The 33-year-old mother-to-be had mailed it before her husband choked her to death.

"She tried for some time to get pregnant, and it wasn't happening," her mother recalled. "She wanted the baby more than anything."

Clues From 2002

One recent year of homicides -- 2002 -- was examined in greater detail to get a closer look at how and why the cases happened. For a group of 72 homicides in 24 states, The Post interviewed family members, friends, prosecutors and police. The analysis showed that nearly two-thirds of the cases had a strong relation to pregnancy or involved a domestic-violence clash in which pregnancy may have been a factor.

The dead included Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie, 23, a college student in Richmond who was beaten to death by her boyfriend. The couple had dated on and off for years, and she had had abortions previously, prosecutors said. This time, he was married -- and she refused to end her pregnancy. Turkey hunters found her bludgeoned body in the woods.

In Chicago, Chavanna Prather, 17, was a high school student who played basketball and worked part time at McDonald's. Prather became intimate with her manager at work, then became pregnant and asked for money for an abortion, police said. She was found dead in a river on the city's South Side. He awaits trial.

In Rochester, N.Y., Zaneta Browne, 29, was at odds with her married boyfriend about her pregnancy in 2002 when he shot her with a .22-caliber rifle. The killer and his wife secretly buried her on rural land, hoping no one would find out. Browne left three children behind. She was nearly four months pregnant with twins.

Louis R. Mizell, who heads a firm that tracks incidents of crime and terrorism, observed that "when husbands or boyfriends attack pregnant partners, it usually has to do with an unwillingness to deal with fatherhood, marriage, child support or public scandal."

Young women may be more at risk than others, several statewide studies suggest -- possibly because of more volatile relationships with young men or less money or greater uncertainty about parenthood. Of women whose cases were researched in detail, 16 of 72 were teenage victims -- about one in five.

They included Vanessa Youngbear, a 16-year-old cheerleader in Oklahoma who was nearly seven months pregnant when her ex-boyfriend, then 18, blasted her with a shotgun. Witnesses said the boyfriend had not wanted to pay child support and had worried that he might face charges of statutory rape if authorities found out he had impregnated a minor.

In Nevada, Monalisa Nava was just 14 when she was gunned down -- the same age as the ex-boyfriend who allegedly killed her. Nava was happily pregnant, her mother said, but unwilling to move with her boyfriend to Mexico, as he wanted. Police and family members say he shot her in front of her younger brothers as her mother dialed 911, and he has been on the run ever since.

At any age, "pregnancy is a huge, life-altering event for both the male and the female," said Pat Brown, a criminal profiler based in Minneapolis. "It is certainly a more dangerous moment in life. You are escalating people's responsibilities and curtailing their freedoms."

For some men, she said, the situation boils down to one set of unadorned facts: "If the woman doesn't want the baby, she can get an abortion. If the guy doesn't want it, he can't do a damn thing about it. He is stuck with a child for the rest of his life, he is stuck with child support for the rest of his life, and he's stuck with that woman for the rest of his life. If she goes away, the problem goes away."

In New Jersey, the trouble was not over whether to give birth but how to raise the twins that Marlyn Hassan, 29, a bank manager, was expecting. Her husband insisted that she convert to Islam before the babies were born. She was Hindu and "wanted her children to know both religions," her cousin said.

He stabbed her to death in their home, then killed her sister and mother.

In Maryland, Kennis Falconer, 26, of Takoma Park was living with her fiancé, by whom she was seven months pregnant, when his other girlfriend, posing as a cosmetics saleswoman, came into her apartment and stabbed her. The deadly love triangle was intensified by the pregnancy, prosecutors said. Falconer's fiancé had decided to stay with her, and the couple had bought a home together a short time earlier.

In California, Raye Rapoza, 34, was nearly eight months pregnant when her husband drove the family's minivan off a 150-foot sea cliff.

Prosecutors say he had a history of marital abuse and was fixated on whether the baby was his. Perhaps most of all, "his wife had talked about leaving him, and he wasn't going to let that happen," said Jim Fox, San Mateo County district attorney. The crash killed Rapoza and her 4-year-old daughter. Her husband survived and is awaiting trial.

Although maternal homicide is only recently drawing notice, considerable research has been done on battering of pregnant women. Studies go back 20 years, and many experts have come to agree that 4 percent to 8 percent of pregnant women -- 160,000 to 320,000 a year -- are physically hurt by husbands, boyfriends or partners.

Research shows that for more than 70 percent of abused women, pregnancy does little to change the status quo. For a smaller group, pregnancy brings a peaceful period, when abuse stops. But that is mostly offset by a third group: the 27 percent for whom domestic abuse starts during pregnancy.

Some experts conclude that pregnancy is more "protective" than dangerous, but McFarlane, of Texas Woman's University, maintains that it goes both ways. "It can be a protective time for an abused woman, but it also can be a very vulnerable time," she said, recounting stories of women who were afraid to even tell a husband or boyfriend they were pregnant.

Many women endure hitting and shoving in pregnancy -- or choking and threats to kill -- because they want their child to have a father, or because they feel financially dependent or too vulnerable to break away. Some believe a baby will ease the tension.

The analysis of 72 deaths in 2002 shows that nearly 30 percent were caused by violence that did not seem related to childbearing: drug dealing, robberies, errant gunfire.

A total of 15 cases started with a missing-person report -- and ended with a body discovered in a remote field or woods. Near Huron, N.Y., a body was found, with no missing-person report. The woman had been seven months pregnant.

As analyst Mizell said, "You have to wonder how many missing-person cases happened because she was pregnant."

The Killers

Tammy Baker, 24, was a well-liked bookkeeper who lived in an apartment in Louisa, Va., 30 miles east of Charlottesville,

when she met Coleman "Mike" Johnson Jr., a contractor on a repair job at a nearby nuclear power plant.

The two hit it off for a time, then parted ways. One day, Baker called him to say she was pregnant and intended to have the baby. They argued repeatedly by phone, recalls Tracey Ryder, a friend of Baker's. He did not want a baby, nor did he want any child support obligations. But Baker did not change her mind.

By the time Baker was eight months pregnant, she had chosen a name, Savannah, and decorated a room for the baby girl she was expecting; she worked two jobs to save money.

But the conflict with Johnson never went away. On Dec. 3, 1997, Baker stooped down for what looked like a mislaid garbage can lid outside her apartment door.

Beneath the lid were two pipe bombs.

Baker was killed instantly in the explosion, which literally shook the earth in Louisa, and people in the small town found it hard to imagine. Who would kill a pregnant woman?

"He did it for money," said Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Bondurant. "He didn't want to pay child support."

As in other cases, Johnson at first denied it was his child, then pressed for an abortion, then plotted murder.

"It seems to me that these guys hope against hope for a miscarriage or an abortion, but when everything else fails, they take the life of the woman to avoid having the baby," said Jack Levin of Northeastern University.

Ashley Lyons, 18, faced a similar horror in a park near her old high school in Kentucky early this year -- on the day she went to her doctor for an ultrasound and learned she would be having a boy. She was 22 weeks along.

She had already picked out a name, Landon, and created a baby journal. As one entry gave way to another, she confided her ex-boyfriend's opposition to the pregnancy. Still, she wrote: "You are the child I have always dreamed about. . . . I know it will be a long time before I meet you, but I can't wait to hold you for the first time."

Excited by the ultrasound Jan. 7, Lyons made plans to show the fetal pictures to her ex-boyfriend, Roger McBeath Jr., 22.

She left her family's home, telling her mother she would be back for dinner. But when her father and brother found her, she was sitting in her parked car -- with the car engine running and the headlights on.

She had been shot twice in the head and once in the neck. In her lap was her handbag -- half opened -- with the ultrasound picture inside, her father said.

"He knew that if she had that baby that she would be in his life forever, and he didn't want that," said prosecutor Shawna Jewell.

On a cold Kentucky afternoon four days later, Lyons was buried with her tiny baby tucked into her arms.

Staff writer David S. Fallis and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

Part 2

Violence Intersects Lives of Promise

Relatives and Friends Evoke the Women and Their Paths Toward Death

By Donna St. George
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Second of three articles

On a Saturday night when her sisters tried to persuade her to go out on the town, Shameka Fludd stayed home. Her workweek had been hectic -- tending children at a Laurel day-care center, then staying late on Friday to clean up. She was three months pregnant and lately more tired than usual.

Her suburban apartment in Columbia was comfortable, set on a tree-shrouded slope in a winding complex of similar units -- a long way from the troubled District neighborhoods where she grew up. At 23, she had two sweet kids, a good job and a close circle of relatives and friends.

The pregnancy had come as a surprise. Her circumstances were not ideal, not what a single mother would have chosen if life always happened according to wishes and plans. But she could not bear to have an abortion, she told friends. After five years as a day-care teacher, children had become her calling.

"You don't have to have anything to do with the baby," she told the father. But Tjane Marshall was already a father of two and said a baby would ruin his life, Fludd later told her sisters. His objections upset her, they said. But she did not change her mind.

The couple's clash of wills ended unexpectedly for Fludd in the dark morning hours of May 4, 2003.

That night, her children had stayed with relatives. Fludd was alone, lying in her bed, in a nightgown, prosecutors say, when Marshall dropped by her apartment and asked again about the pregnancy. On the floor near her bed was a copy of Lamaze magazine, with a big, bold cover headline that read: BIRTH.

Hours later, when police were summoned, the magazine was spattered with blood.

Only recently, research has begun to show that cases like Shameka Fludd's are far more common than anyone might have guessed. And as public health experts have begun to home in on the phenomenon of homicide during pregnancy, the Washington region has become a focal point.

Here, experts looking into whether maternal deaths were being undercounted in Maryland and the District discovered in separate studies that a surprising number of pregnancies ended in homicide. Independently, Virginia's chief medical examiner began to probe maternal deaths and identified that 12 percent of them are homicides in her state as well.

Expanding on these findings, The Washington Post conducted a year-long survey of state death record data and documented more than 1,367 maternal killings nationwide since 1990. As startling as the findings are, however, they represent only part of the toll, because no national system exists for tracking maternal homicides.

What has been missing from the research has been the collected stories of the women slain -- more than 125 in the Washington region alone -- who they were, what their relationships were like and how violence intersected their lives at such a pivotal time.

Even in states that track these cases, they are often little more than a checked box on a death-record form -- rarely emerging from the data as young women with lives and hopes and families.

Many, like Fludd, never knew they were in danger.

Unplanned but Undaunted

On Sunday, May 4, 2003, the phone rang again and again in Fludd's Columbia apartment. Her sisters called each other and asked: "Have you heard from Shameka?" By Sunday night, her grandmother, Louella Stukes, was worried that she might have become ill.

Maybe her pregnancy had caused medical complications, she remembers thinking.

She drove to Fludd's apartment and immediately noticed Fludd's minivan in the parking lot. But when Stukes knocked, no one answered. She tried her key, but the deadbolt was locked.

Finally she called Howard County police.

When police and firefighters finally got into Fludd's apartment, through a sliding door on the balcony, they found her lying in bed. She was dead -- with four bullet wounds.

In the hours that followed, Fludd's grandmother stood in the dark, with Fludd's 7-year-old son and a gathering crowd of shocked relatives and friends. It was difficult for anyone to imagine: Fludd had been shot. She was dead. Who would fire on a pregnant woman in her own bed? There was no sign of a break-in.

Over time, some would think back to the tension about her pregnancy. It still did not make sense, they thought. "I just don't understand," Brenda Coleman, Fludd's sister, said not long after she was killed. Marshall "didn't have to have anything to do with the baby."

Shortly after the killing, police interviewed Marshall on videotape for nearly three hours. He did not confess but presented a portrait of his life and hers and how the pregnancy had put them at odds. He said his relationship with Fludd was a friendship that became sexual. "She was never my girlfriend . . .," he said. "But she was my friend."

The two had known each other for years, he said -- having met in the D.C. neighborhoods that Fludd had moved away from as a teenager. He knew her cousin, her mother, her sisters. They were together once, back in 1999, but then he was sent to prison on drug and weapons charges. When he was released, in fall 2002, they got together again.

Fludd, he said, helped him buy clothes and get back on his feet.

For a number of months, they talked or saw each other daily. Fludd was the stable one -- with her own apartment, her job, her kids. Marshall had a job, lost it, fell back into drugs, worked at a basketball gym. He had a number of other girlfriends. By the time Fludd knew she was pregnant, they were still talking but no longer intimate.

On the videotape, he recalled their discussion about the pregnancy. "I told her I didn't really need a child right now. . . . I said it would hurt your life, and it would hurt mine right now. We both have two kids. . . . And she was like, well, yeah, but she wanted to have the baby."

Marshall told police that in previous years he had argued against having each of the two children he already had. "I got two kids," he told the detectives. "I didn't want the first one. I didn't want the second one."

From Fludd's position, the pregnancy looked very different. She had not intended it, she told her friends, but neither did she want to end it. She confided to one friend that a doctor had advised her of medical problems that might preclude her from ever having children again. When she became pregnant by Marshall, "she felt like it was meant to be," the friend said.

The weekend she was killed, Marshall had called her to suggest they talk about the pregnancy again, Fludd told her friends.

While Fludd was at home that night in her apartment, Marshall went to a late-night party in the District. Witnesses told police that he slipped away for at least an hour. Police obtained records of his cell phone calls, which showed Marshall making calls as he drove north toward Columbia.

In the back seat of his rented car, prosecutors would later say, Marshall carried a "murder bag" packed that Saturday -- an extra pair of Timberland boots, a black hooded sweat shirt, jeans, latex gloves and a .22.

When Marshall -- nicknamed "Bird" -- returned to the District, he recounted the killing to his roommate. In court, the roommate testified that Marshall said he approached Fludd as she lay in bed. He asked her if she was sure the baby was his. When she said yes, he raised his gun.

"Bird! No!"

He shot her in the face.

In court, a jury listened to a taped recording of Marshall talking about the killing to his roommate, who had been wired by police with a hidden recording device. Marshall boasted of his own "genius" in setting up the crime. "I wasn't even close enough to . . . get little splashes on me," he said.

Prosecutor Todd Taylor told a jury of eight men and four women: "He wanted to prevent her from having the child she desperately wanted to have" and "move on with his life without the inconvenience of having another baby, another child to support."

Two months ago, a jury convicted Marshall of first-degree murder. Sentencing was set for January.

Fludd's grandmother trembled visibly in the courtroom, surrounded by 11 relatives and friends. She is raising Fludd's son, now 9; Fludd's daughter, now 6, is with her father. "We got justice," she said quietly afterward. "That's all we wanted, and we got it. Shameka can rest in peace."

'With or Without Him'

Two hours from Columbia, Madonna Stewart has had 2 1/2 years to think about her pregnant niece's killing outside Richmond one bleak night in April 2002. She has come to believe that maternal homicide is not an unusual crime but rather another form of the domestic violence that has harmed millions of women.

Her niece, Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie, did not intend to get pregnant, Stewart recalled, but grew very attached to the idea of having the baby once she did. She had had abortions and decided not to do it again. But prosecutors say this put her at odds with the baby's father -- a long-standing but on-again, off-again boyfriend.

"She just said she was doing it with or without him," her aunt remembered.

By then, Stewart-McKinnie was a junior in college, planning on a journalism career and working as a nurse's assistant to support herself. She liked poetry, once thought of herself as a budding actress and had gone to college determined to make good after a rough childhood. At 23, she felt she could manage motherhood.

On the first day of an advanced journalism class in early 2002, she threw her arms up in the air when her name was called and announced: "I'm pregnant!" Her professor, Wilma Wirt, who was leading the class that day at Virginia Commonwealth University, recalled, "I've never seen anybody that wanted something as much."

But Wirt and several classmates grew concerned whenever Stewart-McKinnie talked about her boyfriend. Her descriptions seemed to suggest that he had another life. "There was something that just didn't feel right about it," Wirt recalled.

Still, Stewart-McKinnie reveled in the pregnancy, sang the baby lullabies and by five months along had chosen a name for the girl she was expecting -- Amarea Kimae. She bought dresses and sleepers and diapers. After her second ultrasound, she made it clear that she would be expecting child support, police say.

Her boyfriend, Willis E. Anderson, 27, was married. He had met Stewart-McKinnie years earlier, growing up in the same rough Richmond neighborhood. They had been intimate on and off. But now he had a schoolteacher wife, a young son, a college degree, a comfortable house in the suburbs and a good job as an accountant in state government.

On the evening of April 10, 2002, prosecutors said, Anderson arranged to have Stewart-McKinnie meet him about a mile from her Richmond apartment. She parked her car and climbed into his Chevrolet Suburban. It is unclear where she thought they were going.

In a wooded area, prosecutors said, Stewart-McKinnie understood her peril, jumped out and tried to flee. But it was completely dark, and as she ran -- wearing a sundress and a jean jacket -- she lost her shoes and her glasses.

Turkey hunters happened upon her body three days later. She had been struck at least 25 times with a heavy tool or hammer.

"He was worried [the pregnancy] was going to interfere with his lifestyle," prosecutor Michael V. Gerrard said. "She was going to have this baby. She was going to hit him for child support. It was definitely going to interrupt his way of life."

After listening to the evidence, a jury voted to convict Anderson, who is serving a 50-year term. In an interview from a prison in southern Virginia, he continued to maintain his innocence -- and said Stewart-McKinnie never told him the baby was his. "If it were mine, I would have to own up to it and tell my wife I was cheating . . .," he said. "I'm going to take care of my responsibilities. I'm not going to kill anybody."

Stewart-McKinnie's death came with such horror and pain that her aunt said she has now turned her own life around, opening five homes to help shelter women in need. She calls her program "Ceeatta's House."

"People need to know," Stewart said, reflecting on how violence sometimes gets handed down in a family, repeated and suffered again and again. "I think it's generational," she said, "and I believe you need to break the cycle."

Stewart pointed to a jagged scar on her upper arm. She has more on her abdomen -- cruel reminders of the day, 17 years ago, when she was attacked in a domestic clash.

"I was stabbed seven times while I was pregnant," Stewart said, remembering how she held her own intestine as she was rushed to a hospital. "The only difference between me and my niece is that I lived and she died."

'Still a Lot of Hatred'

The killing of Ceeatta Stewart-McKinnie was one of at least 48 maternal homicides in Virginia since 1990, according to The Post's analysis. Identities of the dead could be pieced together for 45 cases. The cases were then researched in detail to understand more about how and why they happened.

Spread across the state, slightly fewer than half the homicides happened in cities such as Richmond. That's where Gwendolyn Thomas, 17, grew up. She was killed in 1992 by a youth minister she had admired at her church.

He had fathered the child she was expecting and did not want the baby's paternity to be known, prosecutors said.

A third occurred in rural enclaves like where Tabitha Jo Bell was killed in 1993 when she was seven months pregnant. She and her live-in boyfriend were arguing about how often he was going out when he picked up a shotgun and fired at her as she cooked dinner.

About 20 percent of women were killed in suburbs. Ana Diaz, 28, was shot in her car in Reston as 1998 at four months pregnant. Police said it appeared that her former boyfriend was angry that Diaz had moved on after their breakup, expecting a baby with another man. He killed her, then turned the gun on himself.

In Virginia, 12 of the 45 cases have gone unsolved -- among them, the death of Sherry Culp, who lived in Stafford County.

For Culp, pregnancy came both as a surprise and a new source of tension, but not because the baby's father had objections. Her family said the strain was with her ex-husband, whom she had divorced several years earlier, not long after she had an extramarital affair.

At 36, Culp lived with her fiance and had been trying to get joint custody of her two daughters, then 7 and 9. The timing of her pregnancy was not what she had planned. Money was tight, and she worked full time, and she was trying to demonstrate her stability for the court. She briefly wondered whether to continue the pregnancy, said her mother, Jane Young.

By the first days of 1998, however, she was several weeks from her due date and excited. She had prepared the baby's nursery and washed and folded baby clothes. Her green winter parka would no longer zip over her bulging midsection. Early labor pains had started. She expected to deliver early -- as she had with her daughters.

Her relationship with her ex-husband, Donald Culp, remained strained. He lived with another woman by then, but "there was still a lot of hatred," Sherry Culp's mother said. In court documents, a Brownie troop leader described an argument between the couple when Donald allegedly told Sherry she "would never have custody of the girls, and he would see her dead before she had another child."

One Friday, Culp spent the day training the worker who would replace her while she was on maternity leave from the Springfield electronics firm where she worked. She left later than usual, with a fellow employee, police said. They chatted at the front entrance to the buildings, then parted ways.

Culp went straight to her car, about 100 feet away.

A sudden snap of gunfire brought her co-workers heading toward her car. They spotted a man in a hooded sweat shirt walking away. When they got to Culp, they found her slumped behind the wheel.

She was hit before she could get her key in the ignition -- shot twice in the head through the car window in what police suspected was a targeted killing.

Doctors performed an emergency Cesarean section and delivered 6-pound 6-ounce Kelsey Morgan Laughlin. Having gone too long without oxygen, Culp's daughter showed no brain activity and was disconnected from a respirator two days later.

The little girl was buried in her mother's arms. "Had she not gotten pregnant, she might be here today," said Jane Young, her mother. "That's what I live with every day. I really believe that Kelsey was the driving force behind this murder."

In 2002, police served a search warrant on Donald Culp's home outside Cleveland, where he moved after the slaying. Leads in the case -- being investigated as a murder-for-hire -- are still being pursued, said Detective Steve Milefsky of the Fairfax County Police Department.

Donald Culp's attorney, Jay Milano, has said that Culp had nothing to do with the homicide and that although relations had once been bitter between the Culp's, they were getting along well at the time of Sherry's death. "There's no evidence that he killed his wife, because he didn't kill his wife," Milano told The Post in 2002. He did not return calls last week.

Embracing a New Life

In a society that issues warnings of every kind to pregnant women -- about drinking alcohol, about the side effects of aspirin and cough syrup -- the risk of homicide during pregnancy remains unstated and unclear, even as early research may indicate certain groups of women may be more vulnerable -- teenagers, for example.

In a 2002 analysis in Massachusetts, women ages 15 to 24 were three times more likely to die of homicide during pregnancy and postpartum months than their older counterparts.

The results were similar to a Maryland study in 2003 that found that black pregnant teenagers were most at risk.

"It's something we need to look into more," said author Cara Krulewitch, wondering: "Is there a vulnerability factor we don't know about? Is there a social factor?"

In a study of postpartum women in Georgia done by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mothers younger than 20 were almost three times as likely to be killed by homicide as their counterparts who had not recently been pregnant.

Under the most recent public health definitions, deaths up to 12 months postpartum are considered "associated" with pregnancy. Sometimes experts look into cases to determine whether pregnancy was a factor -- and if a death might have been prevented.

In the District, Shirlita Colon was just 14 when she found out she was pregnant. Her mother was not happy about it but concluded that it was a young girl's mistake, an accident. "You do what you feel you can live with," she told her daughter, known as Shirley.

"I want my baby," the teenager told her with certainty.

Her older sister had given birth at 15, and Shirley admired the way she had been a mother and still managed to make great things happen in her life, with shelves of trophies in the family's District apartment and a track scholarship to George Mason University.

Their mother told Shirley she would help with the baby as long Shirley continued her education.

Shirley promised to return to classes after her baby was born.

Having just completed ninth grade, she was still unclear about what she wanted in life. Maybe fashion design -- she had created her own gown for the eighth-grade prom -- maybe something else entirely. Everyone told her she had a gift for comedy, the ability to make even her most reluctant friends laugh.

During her pregnancy, Shirley stayed close to home, in the family's third-floor apartment in Benning Terrace. She kept her doctor appointments, took her vitamins and watched the movies that the prenatal clinic showed on parenting, her mother said.

The baby's father did not share her enthusiasm. Donte Allen had been her first boyfriend, back in seventh grade, when she was a cheerleader and both attended Fletcher Johnson Educational Center. He did not seem violent or dangerous in any way, her mother said.

Allen had little to do with Shirley during her pregnancy, and when she delivered her daughter Feb. 28, 2002, he was not around.

Shirley named the infant Destiny, decided to breastfeed her, thinking it was best for her baby, and doted on her "like a baby doll," her mother said.

"She was changing her clothes three or four times a day," her mother, Tawana Colon, recalled.

In the weeks after Destiny's birth, Allen dropped by briefly once or twice. "I don't think he believed Destiny was his," her mother said. Then, one Sunday in May, he stopped by again, and he and Shirley talked in a stairwell outside her family's apartment. They began to argue. One neighbor said Shirley asked him for money for Pampers.

Shortly afterward, Shirley asked her sister to watch the baby for five minutes, ran outside and climbed into a car with Allen and a friend.

The three drove behind a church -- where Allen pulled out a gun.

At first, Shirley thought he was joking, according to court testimony. Then she ran. As she tried to jump a fence, Allen, 17, shot her in the head. When she fell to the ground, he stood over her and shot her again.

By the time her family arrived, police lights were flashing and yellow tape was strung around the crime scene. Tawana Colon screamed and tried to push through the police barricade to reach her daughter. Finally, she dropped to her knees, she recalled, and prayed: "God, let this not be true."

It was Mother's Day -- and Shirley had been a mother just 10 1/2 weeks.

At Allen's trial, prosecutors said the teenager was so deliberate about the killing that he had taken off a favorite football jersey so it wouldn't get bloodstained.

One friend testified that Allen had explained the shooting a few days afterward by saying, "I'm too young to be a father."

Shirley's mother said that the family had never asked for child support and that she had not imagined he could pay anything, at 17 years old. Shirley, she said, "trusted this guy. I believe my baby died in shock, not believing he would do something like this to her. That's what hurts me so bad."

The jury came back with a guilty verdict, on a charge of first-degree murder, and in July 2003 Allen was sentenced to 45 years in prison. Shirley's father, Isaac Colon II, stood outside the courthouse, feeling little satisfaction. "It's not enough," he said. "My daughter doesn't have a life. Destiny doesn't have a mother for the rest of her life."

Staff writer David S. Fallis and staff researcher Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

PART 3

Mending Shattered Childhoods

Newborns, Siblings and Substitute Caregivers Endure Reminders of Loss

By Donna St. George Washington Post Staff Writer Tuesday, December 21, 2004; Page A01

Last of three articles CHARLOTTE

Chancellor Lee Adams sat on his mother's grave, gazing at the bronze marker that bore her name. It was his birthday, and he had just turned 5, which was exactly how many years it had been since the shooting that took her life.

With one arm around his back, his grandmother gestured at a lush bouquet they had brought. "Look at your mommy's flowers," she said. Chancellor smiled.

Five years earlier, he was delivered from his mortally wounded mother in an emergency Caesarean section -- 10 weeks premature and blue from lack of oxygen. The trauma left him with cerebral palsy. He wears braces on his legs, needs help to walk and speaks only a handful of words.

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you," his grandmother sang to him at the graveside. "Happy birthday, dear Chancellor. . . ."

It has been like this, death and birth inextricably bound, since his famous father arranged the killing of his mother. Rae Carruth was an all-American wide receiver, a \$3.7 million, first-round draft pick for the Carolina Panthers. Now he is in prison, convicted of conspiracy in the 1999 killing of Cherica Adams.

Chancellor's grandmother showed him the big purple balloons they had brought for the occasion -- each tagged with a small photo of Cherica and a verse from the Bible. One by one, they released the balloons into the cloudy November sky.

"I love you, Mommy," his grandmother offered. Chancellor broke into a wide smile. "Yeaaaaah," he said.

'It Was a Miracle'

No one knows exactly how many children like Chancellor are rescued from the wombs of their dying mothers.

But it happened in 2000 when Yolanda Coles, 34, was eight months pregnant and fatally shot outside her Richmond apartment. It happened in 2002 when Tara Chambers, 29, was shot in her Concord, N.C., home and in 1998 when Sherry Culp, 36, was shot outside her workplace in Springfield.

Sometimes these children do not survive. Doctors rush to save them, and families pray, but they die because the trauma has been too much. Culp's daughter lived two days. Chambers's daughter held on for 33 days. "They tried everything they could," recalled grandmother Johnsie Tucker, "but we had to give up."

In other cases, children make it but face debilitating injuries. In Portsmouth, Va., Breonna McRae survived her pregnant mother's shooting in 2002 but suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen. She still does not walk, talk or swallow. She has had pneumonia four times, falling so ill her grandmother LouAnne Sweet has wondered, "Is she really going to make it?" Breonna is doing better lately, the family says, but everything is one day at a time.

Then, against the odds, there are such children as Ter-ron Marquise Oglesby.

His mother, Damita Oglesby, 29, was severely wounded in a stabbing in Atlanta when she was four months pregnant. After three months in a coma, she went into labor. Ter-ron was delivered without complications, a healthy baby boy.

"It was a miracle," said his grandmother Carolyn Oglesby, who recalled that tears ran down her daughter's face when the baby was placed on her chest in the hospital, even though she was still in a coma. Seven weeks after Ter-ron's birth, Damita Oglesby died.

A Washington Post examination of maternal homicides -- which used death-record data to document more than 1,367 killings of pregnant women and postpartum mothers nationwide -- found that one legacy of these homicides is a population of children left to face almost unimaginable consequences. Their mothers are gone. Many fathers are in prison or dead. Their extended families are deep in grief and often reeling financially.

Babies are born in this moment of horror. More often, there are older siblings. In Virginia alone, 68 children were left behind after the killing of their pregnant or postpartum mothers since 1990, The Post's analysis shows. Nationally, in one year -- 2002 -- there were at least an additional 62 of these children.

Some of them struggle not just with loss, but also with memory. They witnessed their mother's death, or heard the crime unfold, or awoke in the morning to discover her body.

Sally Blakely said her 5-year-old grandson had seen enough violence in the house before his mother's killing to imagine it. Erskala Blakely, 22, of Richmond was postpartum with twins and trying to leave the abusive father of her four children when he strangled her.

For weeks, the 5-year-old carried his mother's picture around the house, dwelling on how he might have saved her. His grandmother recalled: "I had to tell him, 'Baby, you were only 5. There was nothing you could have done.' "

The hurt of it all is too intense to ever go away, said Georgia Simmons. Now 62, she has been raising her grandson for nearly 14 years, since the day her pregnant daughter was shot in Richmond and her baby survived an emergency Caesarean section. Christmases are still hard -- she can hardly bear to hear the carols that her daughter loved -- but January is difficult, too: the anniversary of Deborah Randall's slaying.

"Every death day of hers is a birthday of his," she said. "It hits my gut very deep."

'I've Been Shot'

Back in 1999, Chancellor Lee Adams might have seemed bound for a life of privilege and possibility. His father had been widely seen as the future of the Carolina franchise after distinguishing himself as a leading National Football League rookie. Chancellor's mother was a onetime model who attended college for two years, then returned to Charlotte to try her hand in real estate and business.

The couple met at a summer pool party. Cherica Adams had socialized with other athletes, but when she met Carruth, she called her mother, Sandra Adams, and said, "Mom, I've just met my soul mate." That night, she brought him home to meet her father.

Their relationship was off and on, however. Cherica Adams went to Atlanta for a time. Carruth had many other girlfriends. In spring 1999, Adams found out she was pregnant -- and both of them were surprised. Adams took eight home-pregnancy tests before she was convinced, her mother said.

Carruth seemed happy at first, Adams told her mother, but then he asked her to get an abortion. Adams said no.

Once pregnant, she grew to like the idea -- playing tapes of Mozart for her fetus, drinking high-protein smoothies and shopping until she acquired a full baby wardrobe from birth to toddler sizes. "She wanted this to be the perfect baby," recalled her mother. "She was forever rubbing her belly and showing us."

The couple's relationship was rocky through much of her pregnancy. Adams "didn't want to just be Number 1 but the only one," her mother said. For a time, they barely talked. Carruth changed his phone number, then took Adams to task for not calling, her mother said. "He kept making and breaking dates," she said. "He was Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

At some point, Cherica Adams made it clear she would be seeking child support from Carruth. The prosecutor argued that Carruth was deeply opposed to supporting the child of a woman he was no longer with.

In mid-November 1999, Carruth called Adams to say he wanted to make things right, her mother said. He led her to believe that they were going to be a family. He went to a Lamaze class. "He could've changed," Adams told her mother hopefully.

"She wanted so much to be a couple, and I think it was because I was a single parent," Sandra Adams said. "She really wanted to be married and be a family."

On a Monday in November, Carruth called and asked Cherica for a "real date" to a movie -- "The Bone Collector."

After the movie, Carruth and Adams were in separate cars, heading back toward Adams's apartment. According to prosecutors, Carruth led her down a dark road, where he slowed or stopped his SUV. With Adams blocked in, a car with three men pulled alongside her BMW 325 and fired through her window.

Shot four times and bleeding, Adams called 911 on her cell phone. "I've been shot," she said.

"You've been shot?" a 911 operator asked.

". . . I'm eight months pregnant," she said.

". . . How'd this happen?" a 911 medic inquired.

"I was following my baby's daddy, Rae Carruth, the football player."

"So you think he did it?" the medic asked.

"He slowed down and a car pulled up beside me."

"And then shot at you?" the medic asked.

"Yes."

Police rushed to the scene. Still conscious, she again told them what had happened. At the hospital, doctors worked to save her life and delivered her baby -- Chancellor Lee -- in an emergency C-section. The bullet had missed the baby by an inch.

Cherica, 24, died after 28 days in the hospital.

It was about six months later that a neurologist showed Sandra Adams scans of Chancellor's brain. The damage was widespread, she recalled. "They were painting a very bleak picture of his development. They made it sound like he would never be able to walk or talk."

Different Triumphs

Five years after his mother was shot, Chancellor Adams sat with eight classmates and their teachers in a bright classroom with shapes and numbers and letters on the walls. A large chocolate birthday cake sat before him, his grandmother nearby.

One boy asked about a small photo pinned to Chancellor's brand-new moss green sweater.

"That's his mommy," his grandmother said.

"She died," the classmate said, knowingly.

Soon the cake was aglow with a large candle shaped like a 5, and the singing started and Chancellor himself was aglow, listening. When everyone clapped, Chancellor clapped with them.

The little boy asked about the photo again.

"How did his mother die?"

Chancellor's grandmother paused, then said: "His mother got shot with a gun. Somebody was very bad."

This is a fact of Chancellor's life.

It is why he has cerebral palsy, why his legs need braces and why his triumphs are different from the average 5-year-old's. Chancellor can pull himself up from sitting to standing. He can stand on his own for a count of 20.

He has learned about 12 words -- including "good," which he uses eagerly when someone asks him, "How are you?"

He has also learned how to raise his hands above his head and sway in praise, which he does while sitting in his grandmother's lap at church and in his car seat when the radio is on and his grandmother is driving.

At school, he has learned to use his walker so well that he can run across the playground with it moving alongside him -- which he did on his birthday, leaving his grandmother behind.

"Good gracious!" she said. Chancellor beamed.

Adams said the medical experts believe cerebral palsy is not something that can be "cured," but her Christian faith tells her something else. "We believe he's on the road to a full recovery," she said.

Chancellor and his grandmother -- the "dream team," she calls them -- live in a subdivision in Charlotte, in a house with thick carpeting and framed photographs and a living room where Chancellor's playthings are easy to reach: building blocks, board books, a fire engine, a basketball game, an oversize Elmo.

When Cherica Adams died, Carruth fled the state rather than turn himself in and face murder charges. Authorities caught up with him in Tennessee -- hiding in the trunk of a car. In the end, he was convicted on charges of conspiracy to commit murder, shooting into an occupied car and using a gun to try to kill an unborn child. He was acquitted of first-degree murder.

After he was sentenced to nearly 19 years in prison, he told CNN/Sports Illustrated that he had not been involved. "I feel guilty about none of it," he said. He said that his relationship with Adams had been overstated and that he did not know her last name until Lamaze class. "We were never boyfriend and girlfriend. . . . We slept together."

His attorney, David Rudolf, recently filed another appeal on Carruth's behalf. Rudolf maintains that Carruth is innocent. "He was found not guilty of the murder," Rudolf said in an interview. "He is not guilty of the conspiracy. He had no intention of hurting Cherica Adams."

About Chancellor, the attorney said: "Clearly he feels terrible about how Chancellor is. What human being wouldn't be?" He added, "You look at Chancellor and you see Rae."

Just a year ago, Sandra Adams won a judgment of nearly \$5.8 million in a civil suit she filed against Carruth and the three other men convicted in the case. The award came after Carruth decided not to contest the suit, but it may be mostly symbolic because Carruth and the others have no money that can be found, Adams said.

For Chancellor's sake and her own, and in keeping with her Christian beliefs, she said she has forgiven Carruth. "I'm raising his son, and I can't hold on to hateful feelings for him and raise his son," she said. Still, she added: "Justice needs to be served and is being served. I hold him accountable."

Adams stayed home with Chancellor for his first couple of years but is back at work now, supporting herself and her grandson -- "a challenge," she said. It helps that a close friend, Judy Williams, helps care for Chancellor when he is not in school. Williams is a founder of Mothers of Murdered Offspring -- in which Adams has become active.

Chancellor's birthday fell on the organization's annual Thanksgiving fellowship dinner and night of remembrance. So the birthday that started at the cemetery ended at a church hall in downtown Charlotte, where, one by one, grieving families lighted a candle and spoke a few words about their slain relatives.

When it was her turn, Adams introduced Chancellor. "Today is a bittersweet day for us," she said, "because it is five years ago today that my daughter was gunned down and today is also his birthday, his fifth birthday."

She set her lighted candle beside a photograph of her daughter.

Just before the evening was over, Williams took the podium to talk about Chancellor. She asked the boy and his family to come forward. Through Chancellor, she said, "I've learned that there is a God up above, and He determines who lives and who doesn't."

The applause was loud.

Then, for one last time on his fifth birthday, Chancellor listened to the sounds of "Happy Birthday," this time delivered by a crowd of 200. When it ended, his grandmother asked Chancellor in a voice that the whole room could hear: "How are you?"

Chancellor spoke proudly. "Good," he said.

Staff writer David S. Fallis and staff research Bobbye Pratt contributed to this report.

Bittersweet Childhoods of Love and Loss

Grandmother Tries To Raise Young Girls As Daughter Wished

By Donna St. George Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, December 21, 2004; Page A17

For reasons that many families marvel over, some babies are born with few physical problems in spite of violent attacks on their mothers. Victoria Martin was delivered that way after an emergency Caesarean section in Fayetteville, N.C., in 2002.

Her mother, Brandy Martin, had been severely beaten with a baseball bat when she was 29 weeks pregnant. Within hours, doctors delivered the baby -- 3 pounds 5 ounces and premature, but ultimately healthy.

"Her mother had picked her name, and it was Victoria," said her grandmother Reba Skaggs, "and it's so appropriate because she's a little victory baby."

Brandy Martin was a second-year law student who married her high school sweetheart, started a family, became involved in her church and worked toward a career as a prosecutor. The summer before her death, she was an intern in the district attorney's office.

The Martins had been through some troubles in their marriage, including a suicide attempt by Geoff Martin. But relatives and police said nothing suggested the violence of May 4, 2002, when Geoff attacked Brandy while she was sleeping. Brandy lived for six days in the hospital.

With their mother dead and their father in prison, Victoria, now 2 1/2, and her sister, Alyssa, 6, are being raised by Skaggs, 52, who said the blessing of a healthy birth has been mingled with the most intense grief she has known.

"The worst time is at night, because everything is quiet and dark and your mind goes crazy," she said. One recent night, she recalled, Alyssa approached her grandmother tearfully and announced: "It's been so long since I heard my mommy's voice. I don't think I remember it."

Skaggs was devastated. She had kept photographs of Brandy in the house but had not thought to keep Alyssa connected to the sound of her voice. So Skaggs dug out videotapes of Brandy delivering legal arguments for class.

Alyssa watched with excitement, unbothered by the dry subject matter. "Now I remember," she exclaimed. She still asks, "Can I see Mommy at work?"

For a long time, Skaggs said, she had a hard time disciplining Alyssa. "I felt like she lost everything in her life, and I just couldn't," she recalled. "I didn't want her to feel any more sadness."

Skaggs said she still talks about Brandy in present tense, because she is a strong part of her granddaughters' lives. Before bed every night, Alyssa and Victoria kiss their mother's photograph. When they pray to God, they ask, "The next time you see Mommy, can you give her a kiss for us?"

When they have a free day, Skaggs takes the girls to their mother's grave site. Sometimes they bring a picnic lunch. The girls run from one dogwood to another, chase and play.

Their father, Geoff, is an ex-Marine who served as a deacon in his church, a likable man who worked for an industrial supply company and had just been promoted at work.

The evening before the killing, his wife made him a congratulatory cake, and the family went out to dinner to celebrate his promotion and the completion of Brandy's final exams at law school. Police said Geoff had no explanation for the beating and no apparent history of spousal abuse. He is in prison for life and declined to be interviewed.

Victoria is still too young to ask many questions about what happened. But Alyssa was 3 1/2 years old -- and in another bedroom -- the night of her mother's killing. She heard the police banging on the door, saw the tears and never saw either parent again.

What she knows, Skaggs said, is that "Mommy got hurt really bad, and the police had to help us. Daddy had to go away." Mommy, she believes, is in Heaven. She is unclear about Daddy, and Skaggs intends to keep it that way until she is older. "She thinks she has the best daddy in the whole world," she said.

Skaggs has struggled to pick up where Brandy left off with her daughters. She sends Alyssa to a private Christian school because Brandy wanted that, even though it costs more than Skaggs can afford. She has reveled in Victoria's first tooth, first step, first word.

But she constantly thinks of how Brandy should be enjoying her children. "The brain just won't shut off when you go through something like this," she said. "The first thing we do about everything is cry. . . . Absolutely everything is bittersweet."

States Add Penalties For Death of Unborn

Abortion Rights Activists See Measures As Attempt to Redefine When Life Begins

By Donna St. George Washington Post Staff Writer Monday, December 20, 2004; Page A06

When Melissa O'Connell was strangled and beaten to death at nearly nine months pregnant in Chesapeake, prosecutors were asked repeatedly why it was not possible to file criminal charges for the killing of her fetus. Her husband stood trial on one count of murder.

Four years later -- and partly because of her case -- a law took effect in Virginia making fetal homicide, as many call it, a separate crime, punishable in a first-degree case

by 20 years to life in prison.

That day, Virginia became the latest of about 30 states with such a law on its books.

Many of the laws -- including a federal one, signed by President Bush last spring -- have been named or partly inspired by the Laci Peterson homicide in California. The law in Virginia is called Conner's Law, in memory of the boy Peterson was expecting.

"All we had to do was mention the Laci Peterson case, and everyone got it," said Virginia Attorney General Jerry W. Kilgore (R), shortly after the state's bill passed this year. "For some, it requires a case you can see."

The growing catalogue of state laws has opened another chapter in the highly charged debate over abortion rights while also calling attention to how little is known about maternal homicide itself.

Critics say the measures are thinly veiled efforts to redefine when life begins and grant fetuses legal status similar to a child outside the womb. They argue that the laws stand to undermine the rights granted to women under the landmark court decision *Roe v. Wade* -- which is, they charge, what the bills' supporters would like.

"There's no question these crimes should be punished," said Rachel Laser, senior counsel at the National Women's Law Center. "The question is how to do it. I think these laws exist as a tactic by anti-choice folks to erode the right to choose."

Supporters counter that crimes against pregnant women stand to claim two lives, not one, and that punishments should be increased accordingly. They argue that the laws will not affect abortion rights.

In some states, lobbying has been taken up by relatives of women killed during pregnancy -- as it was for Debbie Florence in Connecticut, whose daughter was shot by an abusive ex-boyfriend in 2001 when she was nearly nine months pregnant. "I couldn't believe there was not a law already," Florence said. "Out of all the laws we have for dogs and deer, there was nothing for people."

The heated debate that has ensued in many statehouses has led to both passage and defeat. A Maryland bill, sponsored by state Sen. Leo E. Green (D-Prince George's), was killed in the Senate last spring. The District has no such law on its books, said Patricia Riley, special counsel to the U.S. attorney.

The federal bill that Bush signed covers harm to a fetus that occurs during the commission of a federal crime of violence.

In Maryland, Michael Rexroad, senior assistant state's attorney in Howard County, said he hoped the recent trial of Tjane Marshall would show the need for a law in his state.

Marshall was convicted in late October of shooting mother-to-be Shameka Fludd in a crime prosecutors said was intended to end her pregnancy.

"It was very frustrating for us not to be able to have a separate crime we could charge and not to be able to seek additional time for the separate crime of the death of a fetus," he said. Ending the pregnancy, he said, was "the absolute, clear-cut, manifest motive for this murder."

Jacquelyn Campbell, who studies domestic homicides at Johns Hopkins University, argued that whether good or bad, the law will not reduce maternal homicide. "These men are not thinking about whether they're going to do life or what the consequences might be," she said.

Researcher Cara Krulewitch also questioned the basis for the legislative proposals because no public agency can be definitive about how often these crimes happen. "How can we make a law for something that we know so little about?" she asked.

Some new federal efforts may improve tracking of maternal homicide, such as a model death certificate that asks about a victim's maternal status. But experts also point out that pregnancy questions on death certificates routinely miss many cases.

After Melissa O'Connell was killed in Virginia in 2000, her mother was one of the people who asked prosecutors why O'Connell's husband was not charged with more than one killing.

Kay Briggs said she was pleased when prosecutor Randall Smith called after the trial to say a fetal homicide bill would be proposed by Del. John A. Cosgrove (R-Chesapeake).

Briggs offered to come from her Tennessee home to testify in support.

Her daughter, she said, had already picked out a name -- Alexandria -- and decorated a nursery with Baby Looney Tunes characters. With the pregnancy nearly nine months along, Briggs said, "the baby was fully developed. . . . Laci Peterson's baby counted. I just wish hers had counted, too."

Researchers Stunned By Scope of Slayings

Further Studies Needed, Most Agree

By Donna St. George Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, December 19, 2004; Page A21

In the mid-1990s, Cara Krulewitch sat in a dark, cramped file room in the office of the D.C. medical examiner, poring over autopsies for days that became weeks, then months. She was an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, assigned to the District.

Krulewitch wanted to see whether maternal deaths were being undercounted, as was common elsewhere across the country. Granted access to confidential death files, she assumed she would find more deaths from medical complications of pregnancy -- embolism, infection, hemorrhage -- than anyone knew.

What she stumbled upon instead was a surprising number of homicides: 13 of 30 maternal deaths, more than 40 percent. "I was just stunned," she recalled. "You assume it's a quirk in the numbers. A blip."

Krulewitch dug into medical archives and came across a 1992 journal article from Chicago and a 1995 study from New York City. In both, homicide had emerged as a significant cause of maternal death. It was difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend: Were pregnant women being killed in notable numbers?

"I didn't understand it at all," said Krulewitch, whose study was published in the *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*.

Her research came at a time when maternal mortality rates in the United States had fallen a full 99 percent from the last century, with fewer than 500 women a year dying of medical problems related to childbearing.

Health officials considered this a major achievement but also had set optimistic new goals to bring the death toll closer to what is called an irreducible minimum.

Still, there was a growing interest in doing a better job of capturing every possible case -- and taking note of homicides, suicides, car accidents and drug overdoses. In the larger public health world, the "social" causes of death were increasingly viewed as an important health issue.

"For a long time, violence was not defined as a public health problem," said Jacquelyn Campbell, who studies domestic homicides at Johns Hopkins University.

Even now, studies that analyze maternal homicide are relatively rare.

One of the most comprehensive studies came from Maryland, where researchers used an array of case-spotting methods, expecting to find more medical deaths than the state knew about. Instead they discovered that homicide was the leading cause of death, a finding published in 2001 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

In 2002, Massachusetts weighed in with a study that also showed homicide as the top cause of maternal death, followed by cancer. Two of three homicides involved domestic violence. "This is clearly a major health problem for women," said Angela Nannini, who led the study.

Still, many questions remain unanswered.

"We don't even know what we don't know yet," said Elaine Alpert of Boston University. "We need to look not only at all the contextual factors that may have contributed to a mother's death, but also look to compare deaths and see commonalties between these cases."

On the federal level, the CDC has done its first study of maternal homicide using national data to examine the risk by age, race and start of prenatal care. While that study awaits publication, CDC officials said they had no national numbers on maternal homicide but did release a slide presentation, which reported 281 cases in 16 southern states and the District from 1991 to 1997.

The CDC has started a program to compile and analyze detailed characteristics about violent deaths across the country -- the National Violent Death Reporting System -- but it does not uniformly note maternal status in homicides.

In the latest wave of research, experts have used an expanded definition of what qualifies as deaths associated with pregnancy -- up to 12 months postpartum -- with the idea that some troubles surface after pregnancy ends. Postpartum depression, for example, may play a role in suicide cases. Likewise, homicides can be related to the "chain of events" started by a pregnancy.

In a CDC study of postpartum mothers, those younger than 20 were almost three times as likely to be homicide victims as their counterparts who were not recently pregnant.

Health experts say the better they understand maternal homicide, the better they can tailor efforts to prevent harm during that pivotal time. Most women see doctors repeatedly during pregnancy -- when, the thinking goes, there is a chance to help.

"It's a time when women are open, they are very receptive to information, and they are interested in protecting their children," said researcher Judith McFarlane of Texas Woman's University.

Some criminologists, such as Neil Websdale of Northern Arizona University, say there is a risk in overstating the problem. Websdale pointed out that more than 1,000 women a year are killed in domestic clashes, the overwhelming majority of whom are not pregnant. But Jack Levin of Northeastern University stressed the counterpoint. "This should not have to become an epidemic to get the public's attention," he said.

Determining the precise risk of homicide for new and expectant mothers is not easy, said researcher Isabelle Horon, because the number of pregnancies in a year is unclear. In Maryland, Horon and her co-author instead ranked leading causes of death. Homicide came in fifth for all Maryland women ages 14 to 44 who had not been recently pregnant. For those who were or had been recently pregnant, homicide was first.

After making statistical adjustments for age and race, the Maryland researchers found that pregnant women and new mothers were still almost twice as likely to die of homicide as their counterparts who had not recently been pregnant.

How the Series Was Reported Sunday, December 19, 2004; Page A21

The Washington Post asked every state and the District for any data it had collected since 1990 on traumatic deaths of pregnant and postpartum women. Methods for identifying cases varied widely from state to state, and few could be sure they knew of all or even most cases.

Half the states were able to provide more than eight years of data, mostly based on death record notations or by linking various state records, or both. Twelve other states provided more limited information. Nearly all data collected were given without names.

When it was possible and legally permissible, The Post pieced together the identities of victims and did further research and interviews to identify trends and patterns. The newspaper independently found cases through medical examiners, newspaper archives and interviews.

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